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Pathet Lao Squeezing Meo Out

By D. E. Ronk
Special to The Washington Post

VIENTIANE, March 24—Pathet Lao forces in northern Laos are apparently moving to squeeze out the 100,000 Meo tribesmen who have long served as a buffer for government forces in the area.

At the same time, the Pathet Lao drive seems designed to prevent the Meo from heading south to Vientiane and out of the combat zone altogether. The Meo are believed to be moving behind Pathet Lao lines.

The area in question — about 90 miles north of Vientiane—contains the CIA-supported base at Long Cheng, headquarters for Meo leader Gen. Vang Pao, and American refugee centers.

The recent Pathet Lao seizures of strings of government bases east and west of Long Cheng has had the effect of driving barriers southward. These are now closing toward the center and blocking the Meo's route to Vientiane.

Within the closing pincer Pathet Lao commando and propaganda units are warning the Meo to flee and making lightning commando raids against the most important bases. Isolated terrorist acts have been reliably reported from the area during recent weeks, including firing upon civilian taxis and buses carrying Meo out.

Observers believe that such acts are part of the over-all tactical plan to keep the Meo moving northward and behind Pathet Lao lines.

Roadblocks by Meo who are pro-government, but anti-Vang Pao, are also reliably reported to have been established on Highway 13, the highway from the north to the capital, to keep Meo from fleeing to Vientiane.

The Pathet Lao-North Vietnamese commando raid against Long Cheng on Feb. 14, when sappers blew up logistics warehouses and [illegible] pound, is believed now to have been a demonstration of strength for the Meos' benefit.

During the commando raid, informed military sources indicate, CIA personnel called in American aircraft to destroy the CIA buildings rather than allow the enemy to capture sensitive equipment. During the bombardment more than a score of Meo soldiers were killed.

The attack increased the size of the exodus already going on in the Long Cheng-Sam Thong area. Then, three weeks later, during the night of March 5-6, commandos struck at the Ban Son refugee logistics center, 20 miles southwest of Long Cheng. Little damage was done to the base, according to government spokesmen, but the raid on the highly vulnerable center that had replaced Sam Thong—which had been abandoned under pressure a year ago—sent thousands more fleeing.

Harassment fire and ground probes against scores of pro-government posts within the 50-square-mile area are reported daily. Ban Na, north of Long Cheng and called the "key" to capture of the CIA base, is under virtual siege by artillery and rockets.

Visitors to Ban Son, or "site 272" as U.S. spokesmen call it, say the Americans working there are ready to abandon it "momentarily" and have been issued carbines to carry. They return to Vientiane nightly.

Americans working at Ban Son say that any further attacks would bring total abandonment of the bases.

Refugee officers in the field are not optimistic of their chances to be of further service to the Meo. They note the northward drift of the tribe out of their area and acknowledge that a large section of the mountains south of Luang Prabang is occupied by Meo who have shifted allegiance to the Pathet Lao.

Edwin McKeithen, a U.S. AID refugee worker, says the Meo will eventually have to turn eastward to land they can farm. If they do so they will have to reach an accommodation with the Pathet Lao forces and sympathizers in the area, just as those southeast of Luang Prabang have done.

Although American military sources in Vientiane say Long Cheng, Vang Pao's headquarters and the key base in Northern Laos, is defensible "if no one goofs badly," the CIA is known to be building a lowland site for its operations. It has already moved much of the sensitive equipment away from Long Cheng.

"As families of Meo soldiers move away from Long Cheng for safety the base is left without its buffer against direct attack—and desertions are climbing as soldiers leave to accompany families," a recent Western visitor to the area reports.

American officials in the area have become frank in admitting that the Meo civilians serve as buffers.

Such use of the Meo is said to be the only real topic of discussion among the minor Meo chiefs at present, as they realize how badly the tribe has been hurt in the past decade and search for alternatives.

Since 1959, when Vang Pao allied a third of the Meo clans with the CIA, "at least 40-50 per cent of the men have been killed and 25 per cent of the women have fallen as casualties of the war," out of an estimated 400,000 Meo, according to last year's Kennedy subcommittee report on refugees.

Elaine W. Jensen, the acting area coordinator for U.S. AID at Ban Son, has said, "I have a bunch of scared people. When civilians start getting killed it has quite an effect on the population."

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